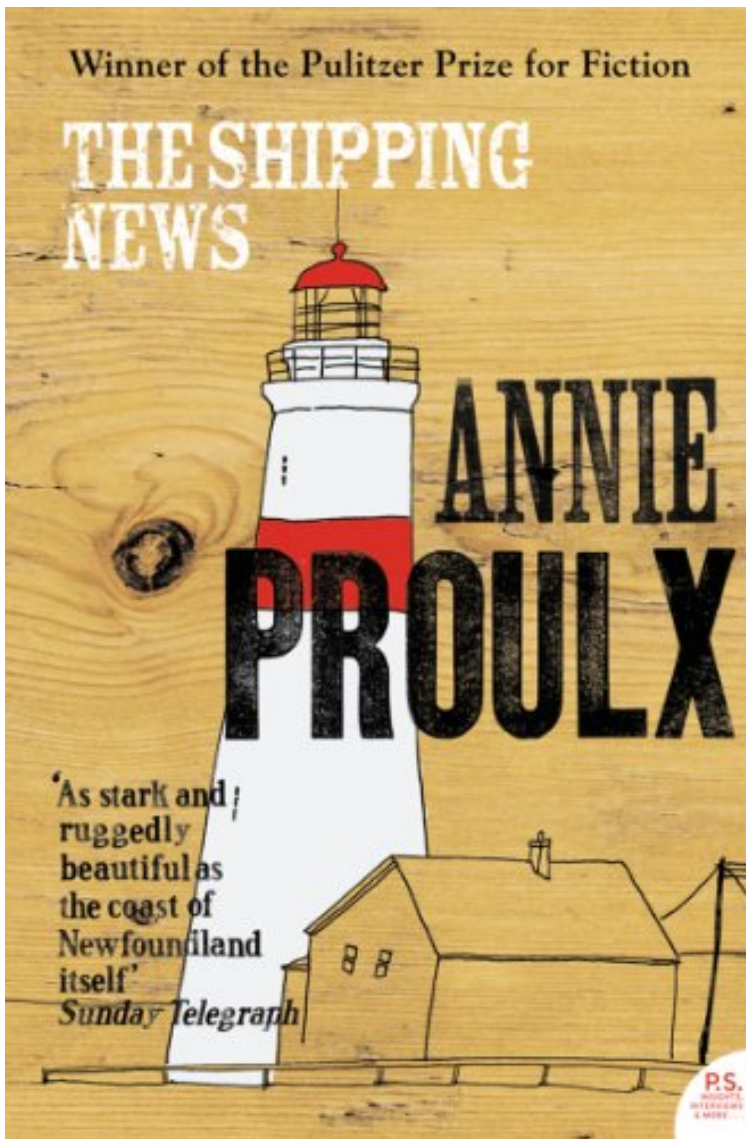


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# The Shipping News



Par Annie Proulx  
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## Description :

Prsentation de l'diteurAnnie Proulx's highly acclaimed, international bestseller and Pulitzer Prize-winning novel. Quoye is a hapless, hopeless hack journalist living and working in New York. When his no-good wife is killed in a spectacular road accident, Quoye heads for the land of his forefathers the remotest corner of far-flung Newfoundland. With the aunt and his delinquent daughters Bunny and Sunshine in tow, Quoye finds himself part of an unfolding, exhilarating Atlantic drama. The Shipping News is an irresistible comedy of human life and possibility..com This darkly comic, wonderfully inventive work, winner of the 1993 National Book Award, transforms the lore of Newfoundland--including shipwrecks, nautical knot-tying, horrid weather and family legend--into brilliant literary art. It is the story of the rebirth of Quoye, a hulking, inarticulate, misery-ridden widower who flees upstate New York to take up residence in Newfoundland. The

island of his forebears, Newfoundland is a dreary rock in the north Atlantic beset by lousy weather. Proulx lovingly recreates this hardscrabble location in her vivid, distinctive prose and populates it with a cast of amusing, richly human characters. Quoye, a "third-rate newspaperman," makes a hit with his "Shipping News" column, while his anguish at the loss of his faithless wife is slowly transformed by the strengthening ties that bind him to the place and to his fellow Newfoundlanders.

Chapter 1 Quoye Quoye: A coil of rope." A Flemish flake is a spiral coil of one layer only. It is made on deck, so that it may be walked on if necessary." THE ASHLEY BOOK OF KNOTS Here is an account of a few years in the life of Quoye, born in Brooklyn and raised in a shuffle of dreary upstate towns. Hive-spangled, gut roaring with gas and cramp, he survived childhood; at the state university, hand clapped over his chin, he camouflaged torment with smiles and silence. Stumbled through his twenties and into his thirties learning to separate his feelings from his life, counting on nothing. He ate prodigiously, liked a ham knuckle, buttered spuds. His jobs: distributor of vending machine candy, all-night clerk in a convenience store, a third-rate newspaperman. At thirty-six, bereft, brimming with grief and thwarted love, Quoye steered away to Newfoundland, the rock that had generated his ancestors, a place he had never been nor thought to go. A watery place. And Quoye feared water, could not swim. Again and again the father had broken his clenched grip and thrown him into pools, brooks, lakes and surf. Quoye knew the flavor of brack and waterweed. From this youngest son's failure to dog-paddle the father saw other failures multiply like an explosion of virulent cells -- failure to speak clearly; failure to sit up straight; failure to get up in the morning; failure in attitude; failure in ambition and ability; indeed, in everything. His own failure. Quoye shambled, a head taller than any child around him, was soft. He knew it. "Ah, you lout," said the father. But no pygmy himself. And brother Dick, the father's favorite, pretended to throw up when Quoye came into a room, hissed "Lardass, Snotface, Ugly Pig, Warthog, Stupid, Stinkbomb, Fart-tub, Greasebag," pummeled and kicked until Quoye curled, hands overhead, sniveling, on the linoleum. All stemmed from Quoye's chief failure, a failure of normal appearance. A great damp loaf of a body. At six he weighed eighty pounds. At sixteen he was buried under a casement of flesh. Head shaped like a crenshaw, no neck, reddish hair rucked back. Features as bunched as kissed fingertips. Eyes the color of plastic. The monstrous chin, a freakish shelf jutting from the lower face. Some anomalous gene had fired up at the moment of his begetting as a single spark sometimes leaps from banked coals, had given him a giant's chin. As a child he invented stratagems to deflect stares; a smile, downcast gaze, the right hand darting up to cover the chin. His earliest sense of self was as a distant figure: there in the foreground was his family; here, at the limit of the far view, was he. Until he was fourteen he cherished the idea that he had been given to the wrong family, that somewhere his real people, saddled with the changeling of the Quoyes, longed for him. Then, foraging in a box of excursion mementoes, he found photographs of his father beside brothers and sisters at a ship's rail. A girl, somewhat apart from the others, looked toward the sea, eyes squinted, as though she could see the port of destination a thousand miles south. Quoye recognized himself in their hair, their legs and arms. That sly-looking lump in the shrunken sweater, hand at his crotch, his father. On the back, scribbled in blue pencil, "Leaving Home, 1946." At the university he took courses he couldn't understand, humped back and forth without speaking to anyone, went home for weekends of excoriation. At last he dropped out of school and looked for a job, kept his hand over his chin. Nothing was clear to lonesome Quoye. His thoughts churned like the amorphous thing that ancient sailors, drifting into arctic half-light, called the Sea Lung; a heaving sludge of ice under fog where air blurred into water, where liquid was solid, where solids dissolved, where the sky froze and light and dark muddled. He fell into newspapering by dawdling over greasy saucisson and a piece of bread. The bread was good, made without yeast, risen on its own fermenting flesh and baked in Partridge's outdoor oven. Partridge's yard smelled of burnt cornmeal, grass clippings, bread steam. The saucisson, the bread, the wine, Partridge's talk. For these things he missed a chance at a job that might have put his mouth to bureaucracy's taut breast. His father, self-hauled to the pinnacle of produce manager for a supermarket chain, preached a sermon illustrated with his own history -- "I had to wheel barrows of sand for the stonemason when I came here," And so forth. The father admired the mysteries of business -- men signing papers shielded by their left arms, meetings behind opaque glass, locked briefcases. But Partridge, dribbling oil, said, "Ah, fuck it." Sliced purple tomato. Changed the talk to descriptions of places he had been, Strabane, South Amboy, Clark Fork. In Clark Fork had played pool with a man with a deviated septum. Wearing kangaroo gloves. Quoye in the Adirondack chair, listened, covered his hand with his chin. There was olive oil on his interview suit, a tomato seed on his diamond-patterned tie. Quoye and Partridge met at a laundromat in Mockingburg, New York. Quoye was humped over the newspaper, circling help wanted ads while his Big Man shirts revolved.

Partridge remarked that the job market was tight. Yes, said Quoyle, it was. Partridge floated an opinion on the drought, Quoyle nodded. Partridge moved the conversation to the closing of the sauerkraut factory. Quoyle fumbled his shirts from the dryer; they fell on the floor in a rain of hot coins and ballpoint pens. The shirts were streaked with ink. "Ruined," said Quoyle. "Naw," said Partridge. "Rub the ink with hot salt and talcum powder. Then wash them again, put a cup of bleach in." Quoyle said he would try it. His voice wavered. Partridge was astonished to see the heavy man's colorless eyes enlarged with tears. For Quoyle was a failure at loneliness, yearned to be gregarious, to know his company was a pleasure to others. The dryers groaned. "Hey, come by some night," said Partridge, writing his slanting address and phone number on the back of a creased cash register receipt. He didn't have that many friends either. The next evening Quoyle was there, gripping paper bags. The front of Partridge's house, the empty street drenched in amber light. A gilded hour. In the bags a packet of imported Swedish crackers, bottles of red, pink and white wine, foil-wrapped triangles of foreign cheeses. Some kind of hot, juggling music on the other side of Partridge's door that thrilled Quoyle. They were friends for a while, Quoyle, Partridge and Mercalia. Their differences: Partridge black, small, a restless traveler across the slope of life, an all-night talker; Mercalia, second wife of Partridge and the color of a brown feather on dark water, a hot intelligence; Quoyle large, white, stumbling along, going nowhere. Partridge saw beyond the present, got quick shots of coming events as though loose brain wires briefly connected. He had been born with a caul; at three, witnessed ball lightning bouncing down a fire escape; dreamed of cucumbers the night before his brother-in-law was stung by hornets. He was sure of his own good fortune. He could blow perfect smoke rings. Cedar waxwings always stopped in his yard on their migration flights. Now, in the backyard, seeing Quoyle like a dog dressed in a man's suit for a comic photo, Partridge thought of something. "Ed Punch, managing editor down at the paper where I work is looking for a cheap reporter. Summer's over and his college rats go back to their holes. The paper's junk, but maybe give it a few months, look around for something better. What the hell, maybe you'd like it, being a reporter." Quoyle nodded, hand over chin, If Partridge suggested he leap from a bridge he would at least lean on the rail. The advice of a friend. "Mercalia! I'm saving the heel for you, lovely girl. It's the best part. Come on out here." Mercalia put the cap on her pen. Weary of prodigies who bit their hands and gyred around parlor chairs spouting impossible sums, dust rising from the oriental carpets beneath their stamping feet. Ed Punch talked out of the middle of his mouth. While he talked he examined Quoyle, noticed the cheap tweed jacket the size of a horse blanket, fingernails that looked regularly held to a grindstone. He smelled submission in Quoyle, guessed he was butter of fair spreading consistency. Quoyle's own eyes roved to a water-stained engraving on the wall. He saw a grainy face, eyes like glass eggs, a fringe of hairs rising from under the collar and cascading over its starched rim. Was it Punch's grandfather in the chipped frame? He wondered about ancestors. "This is a family paper. We run upbeat stories with a community slant." The Mockingburg Record specialized in fawning anecdotes of local business people, profiles of folksy characters; this thin stuff padded with puzzles and contests, syndicated columns, features and cartoons. There was always a self-help quiz -- "Are You a Breakfast Alcoholic?" Punch sighed, feigned a weighty decision. "Put you on the municipal beat to help out Al Catalog. He'll break you in. Get your assignments from him." The salary was pathetic, but Quoyle didn't know. Al Catalog, face like a stubbled bun, slick mouth, ticked the back of his fingernail down the assignment list. His glance darted away from the back of Quoyle's chin, hammer on a nail. "O.k., planning board meeting's a good one for you to start with. Down at the elemennary school. Whyn't you take that tonight? Sit in the little chairs. Write down everything you hear, type it up. Five hundred max. Take a recorder, you want. Show me the piece in the A.M. Lemme see it before you give it on to that black son of a bitch on the copy desk." Partridge was the black son of a bitch. Quoyle at the back of the meeting, writing on his pad. Went home, typed and retyped all night at the kitchen table. In the morning, eyes circled by rings, nerved on coffee, he went to the newsroom. Waited for Al Catalog. Ed Punch, always the first through the door, slid into his office like an eel into the rock. The A.M. parade started. Feature-page man swinging a bag of coconut doughnuts; tall Chinese woman with varnished hair; elderly circulation man with arms like hawsers; two women from layout; photo editor, yesterday's shirt all underarm stains. Quoyle at his desk pinching his chin, his head down, pretending to correct his article. It was eleven pages long. At ten o'clock, Partridge. Red suspenders and a linen shirt. He nodded and patted his way across the newsroom, stuck his head in Punch's crevice, winked at Quoyle, settled into the copy desk slot in front of his terminal. Partridge knew a thousand things, that wet ropes held greater weight, why a hard-boiled egg spun more readily than a raw. Eyes half closed, head tipped back in a light trance, he could cite baseball statistics as the ancients unreeled The Iliad. He reshaped banal prose, scraped

the mold off Jimmy Breslin imitations. "Where are the reporters of yesteryear?" he muttered, "the nail-biting, acerbic, alcoholic nighthawk bastards who truly knew how to write?" Quoyale brought over his copy. "Al isn't in yet," he said, squaring up the pages, "so I thought I'd give it to you." His friend did not smile. Was on the job. Read for a few seconds, lifted his face to the fluorescent light. "Edna was in she'd shred this. Al saw it he'd tell Punch to get rid of you. You got to rewrite this. Here, sit down. Show you what's wrong.

They say reporters can be made out of anything. You'll be a test case." It was what Quoyale had expected. "Your lead," said Partridge. "Christ!" He read aloud in a high-pitched singsong. Last night the Pine Eye Planning Commission voted by a large margin to revise earlier recommendations for amendments to the municipal zoning code that would increase the minimum plot size of residential properties in all but downtown areas to seven acres. "It's like reading cement. Too long. Way, way, way too long. Confused. No human interest. No quotes. Stale." His pencil roved among Quoyale's sentences, stirring and shifting. "Short words. Short sentences. Break it up. Look at this, look at this. Here's your angle down here. That's news.

Move it up." He wrenched the words around, Quoyale leaned close, stared, fidgeted, understood nothing. "O.k., try this. Pine Eye Planning Commission member Janice Foxley resigned during an angry late-night Tuesday meeting. "I'm not going to sit here and watch the poor people of this town get sold down the river," Foxley said. A few minutes before Foxley's resignation the commission approved a new zoning law by a vote of 9 to 1. The new law limits minimum residential property sizes to seven acres. "Not very snappy, no style, and still too long," said Partridge, "but going in the right direction. Get the idea? Get the sense of what's news? What you want in the lead? Here, see what you can do. Put some spin on it." Partridge's fire never brought him to a boil. After six months of copy desk fixes Quoyale didn't recognize news, had no aptitude for detail. He was afraid of all but twelve or fifteen verbs. Had a fatal flair for the false passive. "Governor Murchie was handed a bouquet by first grader Kimberley Plud," he wrote and Edna, the crusty rewrite woman, stood up and bellowed at Quoyale. "You lobotomized moron. How the hell can you hand a governor?" Quoyale another sample of the semi-illiterates who practiced journalism nowadays. Line them up against the wall! Quoyale sat through meetings scribbling on pads. It seemed he was part of something. Edna's roars, Partridge's picking did not hurt him. He had come up under the savage brother, the father's relentless criticism. Thrilled at the sight of his byline. Irregular hours encouraged him to imagine that he was master of his own time. Home after midnight from a debate on the wording of a minor municipal bylaw on bottle recycling, he felt he was a pin in the hinge of power. Saw the commonplaces of life as newspaper headlines.

Man Walks Across Parking Lot at Moderate Pace. Women Talk of Rain. Phone Rings in Empty Room. Partridge labored to improve him. "What don't happen is also news, Quoyale." "I see." Pretending to understand. Hands in pockets. "This story on the County Mutual Aid Transportation meeting? A month ago they were ready to start van service in four towns if Bugle Hollow came in. You say here that they met last night, then, way down at the end you mention sort of as a minor detail, that Bugle Hollow decided not to join. You know how many old people, no cars, people can't afford a car or a second car, commuters, been waiting for that goddamn van to pull up? Now it's not going to happen. News, Quoyale, news. Better get your mojo working." A minute later added in a different voice that he was doing Greek-style marinated fish and red peppers on skewers Friday night and did Quoyale want to come over? He did, but wondered what a mojo actually was. In late spring Ed Punch called Quoyale into his office, said he was fired. He looked out of his ruined face past Quoyale's ear. "It's more of a layoff. If it picks up later on..." Quoyale got a part-time job driving a cab. Partridge knew why. Talked Quoyale into putting on a huge apron, gave him a spoon and a jar. "His kids home from college. They got your job. Nothing to cry over. That's right, spread that mustard on the meat, let it work in." In August, snipping dill into a Russian beef stew with pickles, Partridge said, "Punch wants you back. Says you're interested, come in Monday morning." Punch played reluctant. Made a show of taking Quoyale back as a special favor. Temporary. The truth was Punch had noticed that Quoyale, who spoke little himself, inspired talkers. His only skill in the game of life. His attentive posture, his flattering nods urged waterfalls of opinion, reminiscence, recollection, theorizing, guesstimating, exposition, synopsis and explication, juiced the life stories out of strangers. And so it went. Fired, car wash attendant, rehired. Fired, cabdriver, rehired. Back and forth he went, down and around the county, listening to the wrangles of sewer boards, road commissions, pounding out stories of bridge repair budgets. The small decisions of local authority seemed to him the deep workings of life. In a profession that tutored its practitioners in the baseness of human nature, that revealed the corroded metal of civilization, Quoyale constructed a personal illusion of orderly progress. In atmospheres of disintegration and smoking jealousy he imagined rational compromise. Quoyale and Partridge ate poached trout and garlic shrimps. Mercalia not there. Quoyale tossed

the fennel salad. Was leaning over to pick up a fallen shrimp when Partridge rang his knife on the wine bottle."Announcement. About Mercalia and me."Quoyle, grinning. Expected to hear they were having a kid.

Already picked himself for godfather."Moving to California. Be leaving Friday night." "What?" said Quoyle."Why we're going, the raw materials," Partridge said. "Wine, ripe tomatillos, alligator pears." He poured fum blanc, then told Quoyle that really it was for love, not vegetables."Everything that counts is for love, Quoyle. It's the engine of life."Mercalia had thrown down her thesis, he said, had gone blue-collar. Travel, cowboy boots, money, the gasp of air brakes, four speakers in the cab and the Uptown String Quartet on the tape deck. Enrolled in long-distance truck driving school. Graduated summa cum laude. The Overland Express in Sausalito hired her."She is the first black woman truck driver in America," said Partridge, winking tears. "We already got an apartment. Third one she looked at." It had, he said, a kitchen with French doors, heavenly bamboo shading the courtyard. Herb garden the size of a prayer rug. In which he would kneel."She got the New Orleans run. And I am going out there. Going to make smoked duck sandwiches, cold chicken breast with tarragon, her to take on the road, not go in the diners. I don't want Mercalia in those truck places. Going to grow the tarragon. I can pick up a job. Never enough copy editors to go around. Get a job anywhere."Quoyle tried to say congratulations, ended up shaking and shaking Partridge's hand, couldn't let go."Look, come out and visit us," said Partridge. "Stay in touch." And still they clasped hands, pumping the air as if drawing deep water from a well.Quoyle, stuck in bedraggled Mockingburg. A place in its third death. Stumbled in two hundred years from forests and woodland tribes, to farms, to a working-class city of machine tool and tire factories. A long recession emptied the downtown, killed the malls. Factories for sale. Slum streets, youths with guns in their pockets, political word-rattle of some litany, sore mouths and broken ideas. Who knew where the people went? Probably California.Quoyle bought groceries at the AB Grocery; got his gas at the DG Convenience; took the car to the RR Garage when it needed gas or new belts. He wrote his pieces, lived in his rented trailer watching television. Sometimes he dreamed of love. Why not? A free country. When Ed Punch fired him, he went on binges of cherry ice cream, canned ravioli.He abstracted his life from the times. He believed he was a newspaper reporter, yet read no paper except The Mockingburg Record, and so managed to ignore terrorism, climatological change, collapsing governments, chemical spills, plagues, recession and failing banks, floating debris, the disintegrating ozone layer. Volcanoes, earthquakes and hurricanes, religious frauds, defective vehicles and scientific charlatans, mass murderers and serial killers, tidal waves of cancer, AIDS, deforestation and exploding aircraft were as remote to him as braid catches, canions and rosette-embroidered garters. Scientific journals spewed reports of mutant viruses, of machines pumping life through the near-dead, of the discovery that the galaxies were streaming apocalyptically toward an invisible Great Attractor like flies into a vacuum cleaner nozzle. That was the stuff of others' lives. He was waiting for his to begin.He got in the habit of walking around the trailer and asking aloud, "Who knows?" He said, "Who knows?" For no one knew. He meant, anything could happen.A spinning coin, still balanced on its rim, may fall in either direction.Copyright 1993 by E. Annie Proulx